**Midlothian Council Education Communities and Economy**



**Title of Report:** Proposal for Penicuik ASK Project

The “ASK Project” is a ‘Combined Services Programme’. We aim to develop a project which will provide services to those experiencing poverty and other issues.

**Purpose of Report:**

This report summarises the development of a service to offer additional support to service users who live within, but not exclusively, the Penicuik and surrounding area. This recognises the partnership between Midlothian Council Children’s Services, Communities Team, Housing Departments, other Local authority services and third sector partners in this proposal and sets out recommendations for future planning and evaluation.

**Background**

This project will operate and evolve from a position of identified need and as such will not fall into a textbook category such as “advisory” or “signposting” service. In many cases the issues of poverty can be linked to wider issues such as substance abuse or changes to benefits system and our aim of each encounter is to formulate a support package, for example which will allow a person to address rent arrears and debt management. Such packages may need to exist for up to 8- 10 weeks to reflect the current Universal Credit timelines, and could require the input and support of other Council departments.

**Developments**

**National and Local Drivers:**

Within the Single Midlothian Plan 3 year priorities 2016/19:

1. Reducing inequalities in the health of our population

2. Reducing inequalities in the outcomes of learning in our population

3. Reducing inequalities in the economic circumstances of our population

Each Thematic group has identified their 3 year priorities which link to the 3 agreed priorities stated above.

**Adult Health and Care (AHC**) - People are able to look after and improve their own health and wellbeing and live in good health for longer

**Community Safety (CS**) - People feel safe in their neighbourhoods and homes

**Getting it Right for Every Midlothian Child (GIRFEMC)** - All Midlothian children and young people are being offered access to timely and appropriate supports….to be healthy, happy and reach their potential

**Improving opportunities in Midlothian (IOM)** - There is a reduction in inequality in health outcomes.

Sustainable Growth (SG) - Homelessness has reduced, and people threatened with homelessness can access advice and support services.

**Midlothian Council Communities Team Plan**

**4. Profile, priorities and influence**

4.1 To be effective the Team must have a local profile across Midlothian. In practice this means that any community group can easily find out who to contact to get officer support in their area.

4.4 To achieve our shared aspiration of vibrant communities, the team must work hard to engage other council departments to provide bespoke and timely support to community groups. Our starting point is one of cooperation with colleagues and when required we should routinely seek governance via the Corporate Management Team.

4.5 A key priority of the team must be to work across departments to foster the sharing of information, skills and resources. The team needs to focus on enabling seldom heard voices to be heard, reducing the inequality and attracting inward investment into Midlothian. Supporting third sector organisations is central to this.

**Communities Team Plan:**

‘…as a team we have responsibility for the following key work areas’:

5. Deliver the actions in the child poverty plan, and prepare new plan to meet the requirements of the Child Poverty Act.

6. Develop a coherent food poverty reduction strategy.

**Impact of New Welfare Reforms:**

It has been recognised that the changes to the benefits system will also cause problems for households reliant on housing benefit. In Midlothian, 48% of Council tenants and a similar proportion of housing association tenants are reliant on housing benefit payment in order to afford their housing. The effects of these reforms will impact on the housing sector in a variety of ways, such as: Increased debt problems for tenants.

Key outcomes that are relevant to Local Housing Strategy outcomes include:

* Local Outcome 1 - Reduce Relative Poverty Levels in Midlothian
* Local Outcome 6 - All children and vulnerable adults have safe lives

The costs of homelessness are high for both central and local government in terms of the costs of providing and paying for accommodation for households who are homeless.

**Proposal /Improving Outcomes**

Service users should be able to have their Council needs met in their own community, (there are some new single people accommodation units in the area) and due to lack of familiarity using online services or being at a crisis point where intervention and a range of support is needed.

The proposal is to open in Penicuik Town Hall one Wednesday per month (10am – 4pm) to offer walk in services where people can ASK for help or support. This need has become apparent through our knowledge of voluntary sector and the individual circumstances of those experiencing food poverty, housing difficulties such as rent arrears, death/ funeral poverty and feedback through consultations such as the recent Penicuik Neighbourhood Plan, where the loss of a high street bank in particular was highlighted as a major concern.

We will have an evolving programme to meet relevant issues, but initially we will look to address the following:

* Rent arears
* Tenancy support
* Food support
* Housing and homelessness
* Community Safety
* Remediation and resolution
* Debt management

**Preventative Approaches**

To make information and staff avaible will ensure that all residents who require support receive appropriate advice will support the prevention of homelessness, increase income maximisation, support tenancies and reduces the demands on other services across the authority. The ASK service will help improve the health and wellbeing of the community in the widest context linking with and to, the most appropriate services to meet their individual needs.

**Report Implications**

**Resource:**

No increase in finance will be required from any contributing organisation. The resources initially required are:

* (Redeployment of) Staff time
* Use of rooms within Penicuik Town Hall during standard opening hours (which are of no cost to Council employees)
* An agreement by creative staff, able to take a holistic view and use a ‘person centred approach’, to deal with relevant (and possibly crisis) issues, and a willingness to collaborate to resolve such problems.
* Internal communications systems such as phones, computers and admin resources

**Recommendations**

**First Tier support:**

The following staff or volunteers are willing to commit to the project:

* Lorraine Chapman – Children and Families – Early Intervention and Prevention.
* Tommy Goldie – Communities – Food poverty and reducing inequalities.
* Lynn Brennan – RBS Community Banking Officer
* June Horne local volunteer – Sweet Dignity Clothing library (along with assisting volunteers)
* Penicuik Citizens Advice Bureaux

Royal Bank of Scotland closed their Penicuik branch in June 2018, leaving many older people, people with additional learning needs and those in supported accommodation in Penicuik having either to use online banking or travel to Peebles or Dalkeith, adding to their costs. The mobile bank will be based in the locality in Penicuik Wednesdays for approximately one hour and Lynn Brennan, RBS Community Banking Officer, will then relocate to Penicuik Town Hall afterwards to work with those accessing or having difficulty with RBS banking services.

The Sweet Dignity/ Penicuik Clothing library will be active every Wednesday and will provide clothes, nappies, baby food and other household items either to borrow or to keep subject to membership and if necessary to non-members in emergency need. Sweet Dignity have also on several occasions received large pieces of furniture and household goods donated which have been distributed quickly as they have no storage for large items. They are however part of a large network addressing local need and often in a position to acquire clothes and household items at short notice. This organisation has been set up in collaboration with Midlothian Council Officer and will collaborate with Council departments wherever possible.

Penicuik CAB have committed support to the project and Sue Peart hopes to have one paid member of staff present each day of operating.

Penicuik Storehouse have committed to giving free food to users referred by the ASK Project.

**Second Tier Support:**

Through the networks and contacts available to the staff listed above we will also have and or require access to the following services which may help at short notice:

* Foodbanks
* CAB
* Church groups addressing poverty within in their projects (e.g. Penicuik North Kirk, St Mungo’s, and Sacred Heart RC).
* Button Box
* Penicuik Storehouse
* Community meal (St James Church).
* Schools (Poverty Proofing the School Day)
* Various other Council Divisions.
* Police Scotland
* NHS Lothian (including MELDAP)
* Beeslack Family Disabled Club
* Ladywood Leisure Centre

**Second tier requirements from Midlothian Council:**

As stated above, there will opportunity for staff development from many departments in the aims of being inclusive, approachable and ultimately help reduce inequality. It would be our ambition to have input and support from other Council departments for the project to be successful in averting crisis and we need a relationship with Council Officers addressing the following:

* Welfare Rights
* Maximising Income
* Housing / Tenancy Issues
* Homelessness
* Lifelong Learning and Employability
* Adult Health and Care Services
* Corporate Resources staff (buildings repairs/ maintenance etc)
* Penicuik Community Police Officers

The aims of the project would therefore need to be agreed and supported at management to overcome any incompatibilities of practice. Slots of second tier support will be allocated in advance to ensure that staff are not left waiting.

There are 3 possibilities of how second tier Council staff could participate.

1. There are hot desks available in Penicuik Town Hall as well as office space and rooms where confidential meetings can take place if staff can commit to one Wednesday per month and /or
2. Tier 2 staff who cannot work from Penicuik Town hall would come to pre-arranged timeslots to address specific issues as part of the client’s care package and,
3. One day per month we propose that these departments will make 1 -2 staff members available on phone and email with the ASK project as a priority for them.

**Engagement**

Adopting a preventative approach the ASK service will be promoted to: existing social work clients which may include different services within Education, Adult & Children’s Services as well as Criminal Justice, Spring Service etc. in addition

* Those accessing foodbank and related services.
* Children’s Centres, Nurseries, Primary and Secondary & Schools
* Citizens Advice Bureaux
* Other community groups and centres (e.g. Leisure Centre, Ladywood Centre)
* Local Penicuik Press and social media sites.

Promotion will be undertaken during summer 18 with a view to opening the ASK service in Autumn 18 and will be evaluated during the pilot phase of the first 6 months.